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ABSTRACT

Several psychological theories are viable when examining the victims of intimate violence, specifically battered women. Although cognitive consistency models view individuals as striving toward balanced cognitive states, battered women can exist with the cognitive inconsistency of being harmed by men who love them. The theory of cognitive arousal sees the novelty of the male/female relationship as one factor in reaching an optimum arousal level. Other theories also attempt to explain why abused victims remain in relationships, including: (1) the "Just World" hypothesis that blames the victim; (2) learned helplessness; (3) an integrative model of reactance theory and learned helplessness; (4) attribution theory that explains learned helplessness as a likely response if failure to exert control is attributed to stable rather than variable factors; (5) sex-role-based theories that suggest that women with low self-esteem and traditional sex-role views have difficulty perceiving their own victimization; and (6) the illusion of control in which the battered woman feels greater control over the familiar abusive relationship than over situations outside the relationship. A vital component of any psychological reversal of the battered women's negative image may be the creation of viable economic alternatives for these women. (NRB)

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The Myth of Cognitive Consistency: Psychological Theories and Intimate Violence

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Running Head: Intimate Violence

The ideas to be discussed in this paper are intended to give an overview of current psychological theories which are being considered in relation to the victim of intimate violence. The focus will be on the battered woman exclusively. It's important to emphasize from the beginning that the battered woman, whatever else she may be, is also very much a victim of society and its structures. A good explication of the social structural causal factors involved can be found in Straus (1977). However, in addition to social structural factors, it's important that we examine the psychological components of the battering relationship in the attempt to understand what happens to an individual under these pressures and circumstances. Hopefully, we can then begin to use this knowledge to change the iniquitous social structure.

The theories to be discussed are the following:

1. Cognitive Consistency & Cognitive Arousal
2. Just World Hypothesis
3. Learned Helplessness
4. The Integrative Model of Reactance Theory & Learned Helplessness
5. Attribution Theory
6. Sex-Role Differences
7. The Illusion of Control

First, let's consider cognitive consistency versus an arousal model. The theoretical triumvirate dominating cognitive models of behavior (balance theory, congruity theory and dissonance theory) all agree that individuals strive toward a balanced cognitive state. Following this line of thought, it is inconsistent for someone who loves you to do harmful things to you. Theorists such as Deutsch, Krauss and Rosenau (1962) have maintained that if there is a need for cognitive consistency, it should be strongest when the information is most self-relevant.

One of the serendipitous findings of our study is that the battered partner in a relationship can coexist for long periods of time with just such cognitive inconsistencies. This was especially prominent in response to the interview question: "Did you see any alternatives to this situation?" Of a total of 36 current or past spousal abuse cases examined for this question, 50% responded to the query with cognitively inconsistent information. Compare this with the controls where we found that only 23% revealed inconsistencies in their responses.

For instance, one person said, "I consciously made a choice to do two things. I was going to take my punishment and stick with this thing and try to make it work; and I was also going to go and get a way to make a living in case it didn't."

When asked, "Was there anything you could have done to

prevent the event?", another woman declared, "No. No. No. Nothing in my power." Then she went on to immediately add, "I called the police on one or two occasions."

Controls, on the other hand, had a clearer grasp of the possible alternatives and their own proclivities towards these alternatives. A typical response was "Yes ... calming down, talking it out ... " Another said, "Absolutely. I could have ..." and went on to list the alternatives.

Certainly, in this case, it appears that the most self-relevant information resulted in the most inconsistency. Opposed to a consistency model are people like Fowler (1965), Berlyne (1960), Bieri (1966) and Fiske and Maddi (1961). These theorists say that we seek out novelty and stimulation--that we behave so as to maintain an intermediate or optimum level of arousal (Fiske & Maddi, 1961). Berlyne (1960), in a variant of Lewin's basic approach-avoidance conflict, states that a novel stimulus will arouse both a generalized excitation and a generalized inhibition of the response, and thus conflict.

This theory applied to battered women designates the suffering involved in the relationship as a strongly negative force. The novelty of the relationship is a positive force. There is for many battered women a positive arousal inspired by the emotional mutability of their partners. Often these men are seen as being heavily invested emotionally in their victims. The

battered woman will say, "He seemed possessed by me."

During the abusive episode, the arousal level is too high and becomes aversive. The woman is more likely to call the police or go to a shelter immediately after the episode: there is a short-term decrement. Then, as the violence-free time passes, an anticipation begins to develop and the novelty effect is restored for the next episode.

Turning to the second theory, we find that society adds further positive weight to maintaining the relationship with the battering partner through the "Just World Hypothesis." People are too willing to believe that the battered woman must be at fault. Lerner's (1978) work has demonstrated that even the victim often responds to her own unjust treatment by believing, "I must have done something to deserve this."

Another explanation of why a victim takes the abuse and remains in the relationship is that of the "learned helplessness" model, our third theory to be considered. Lenore Walker (1979) says that parental and institutional conditioning have defined a woman's role so that she believes that she has no choice but to be a victim. Learned helplessness is a theory introduced by Seligman (1968) and it is a condition whereby one learns that there is no relationship between one's responses and reinforcement.

A variant of this model posits that helplessness occurs not when the organism believes that its behavior makes no difference but when it believes that its behavior makes things worse. Weiss (1971) found that coping or attempts to cope created more stress symptoms than passivity. Applied to the battered woman, this view holds that passivity can be more adaptive in certain circumstances. In an ongoing relationship, a battered woman may anticipate a worse beating later if she calls the cops or attempts to defend herself.

Subsequent research also suggests that learned helplessness is a more inclusive theory when it is combined with reactance theory. This brings us to the fourth theory, the integrative model of Wortman and Brehm (1975). It says that, initially, expectations of control and small amounts of evidence that one has no control produce reactance and renewed efforts to gain control. Then, when one is convinced one has no control, helplessness occurs along with impaired learning and performance.

Predictions about when learned helplessness will result find a theoretical base in attribution theory, the fifth point under consideration in terms of intimate violence. Pittman and Pittman (1980) say that learned helplessness is a more likely response if a person attributes his failure to exert control to stable factors like innate ability or characteristics of the

task rather than variable ones like insufficient effort or bad luck. The future is predictable, and therefore controllable, if the behavior of others is governed by stable, internal characteristics.

Turning now to sex-role factors, we find there are some important differences which illuminate the problem of intimate violence. Deaux (1976) found that females are likely to assume personal responsibility for doing less well, while males are likely to attribute doing less well to external causes. As Steil (1979) pointed out, this leads to the idea that females may have more problems perceiving their own victimization. Steil found that if a sense of efficacy (which is highly involved with high self-esteem, confidence and a sense of certainty) is present, people will acknowledge the unfairness of a situation. When a sense of efficacy is absent, the disadvantaged will deny their victimization. (Consistent across studies of battered women is the finding that they suffer from low self-esteem, and that both victims and perpetrators are traditional in their sex-role views.)

The last theory to be surveyed here is the illusion of control, set forth by Ellen Langer (1975). The illusion of control is the expectancy of a personal success probability inappropriately higher than the objective probability would warrant. Factors from skill situations (competition, choice,

familiarity, involvement) cause individuals to feel inappropriately confident when they are introduced into a chance situation. According to this theory, the battered woman feels greater control over a familiar situation in which she experiences high involvement (i.e., the relationship) than she does outside the relationship where there is as yet no involvement and the situation is entirely new.

Let me summarize what has been covered in this overview. Six theories plus the discussion of sex-role factors pertinent to the case of the battered woman have been outlined. Because our study has documented a lack of cognitive consistency in highly self-relevant information over long periods of time, the emphasis has been on offering an alternative to cognitive consistency in the form of arousal or curiosity theory. Attribution theory has been discussed. We have considered learned helplessness in several guises--and while it is not everyone's favorite explanation, it is currently a prevalent one. Frankly, it would seem more productive to work with the issue of control which is a central point in all these studies. Control certainly appears to be a central issue with battered women.

In conclusion, Langer's research should be highlighted. The battered woman might be helped through gaining an "illusion of control" over events outside the battering relationship. Perhaps an illusion of control can be an effective bridge for

her to leave the relationship for a better life. The key is the term "better life." What is equally vital to any psychological reversal of the battered woman's negative self-image is that there is something waiting on the other side of the "abyss of separation" from a spouse or lover. What we need are economic alternatives for the battered woman; jobs equal in status to those men have; salaries commensurate with what the male breadwinner makes; and a sense of childcare responsibility that extends to the male parent as well as the female. Otherwise, all our psychological bridges will go nowhere.

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